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Rabindranath Tagore's Religious Ideology: A Study of Nationalistic Liberalism in *Gora*

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Abstract

Being an emblem of faith and conviction and one of the earliest institutions of mankind, Religion as a universal social phenomenon is the most powerful means of controlling society. Individual perception of respective religion makes it an 'institutional religion' that further becomes a mode of sociological tool rather than being a spiritual one leading to debates and deliberations. Keeping in cue with the face of continuing debate about the concept of religion, the aim of the present research lies in the study and documentation of the concept of religion and how the institutional religion plays a key role in Tagore's *Gora*. The study is basically explanatory and descriptive in nature. Through *Gora*, Tagore in his work enunciates his developing philosophy about Hinduism. The research highlights how the notion of dialectics and its visibility in the novel evolves a kind of 'universalism' that has eventually become Tagore's legacy.

Keywords- *Faith, Religion, Institutionalised, Universalism, Mankind*

Introduction

Religion as a matter of faith and conviction is a universal social phenomenon. Being one of the earliest institutions of mankind, religion is the most powerful means of controlling society. Due to varied research from various academic disciplines, there exists no single uniform theory or definition of religion. Ronald L. Johnstone has avers that religion is derived from the word 'Religare' which means 'binding together'. Likewise, Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* suggests religion to be a dichotomy existing between faith and practices. Further, he puts forth that "religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities". Elizabeth H. Nottingham, on the other hand focuses upon the emotions and sentiments that are attached because of the traditional belief as they become the determining criteria. Focusing upon the psychological aspects of religion, Malcolm Hamilton claims that religion is an outcome of the fear and security rising from the mind of an individual, emphasized upon by the society to stabilize the

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social system. In a way, there exists no single definition of religion as there is no consensus among the deliberations that have been put forth by various academicians. In the similar vein, one of the significant aspects of religion that lies at its heart is its philosophy. The main idea propagated by every religion is its own philosophy and every person with some preconceived prejudices comprehends this very philosophy in his/her own way, thereby, leading to an individualistic interpretation of all the religious philosophies and to a clash between different religions. But, here, the significant point is that there is no problem in any of the religions rather the problem or mal-intention is incubated inside the people who pretend to monopolies the basic notion. This very vision of humanity becomes narrow with the submission of their intellect towards the proclaimed tenets of a particular religion, which is termed as the 'institutional religion'. Every human being, desiring recognition in the society affiliates him/herself to some group or institution. The most targeted and easy institution where they can connect themselves without any effort is religion and the route towards that is to have faith and belief. Religion when institutionalised becomes a medium of sociological tool rather than being a spiritual one and the belief systems and rituals are systematically arranged so that the established religious leaders can put forth the interpretation of the certain religious text.

The institutionalisation of religions is the key factor of the sustenance and validity of religion in today's world. The exclusiveness and chauvinism make every religion contemplate its superiority over all other religions and this facade of its superiority attracts more followers in the society and at the same time gives birth to hostilities. Peeping into the notion of institutionalisation of religion in Indian context, one can observe many reformers who came from time to time in order to preach non-sectarianism. One such reformer was Rabindranath Tagore who lived a life of non-sectarian and secular outlook. For Tagore, Institutional Religion was "an abstract idea... like the caste system... Men were to be classified according to their inherent differences in temperament." Tagore pointed out the fact that all the religions have been institutionalised to breed hatred towards the other religions. He was aware of the fact that all the religious communities are more often formed upon prescribed customs and preconceived notions rather than truth and the real essence of religion have faded into the oblivion. Religion as an institution has been politicised which brings together all the human beings who are true to their common aspiration and their common aspiration is merely based on the uniformity of habits and the material things. Their congregation is not based on the spiritual reasons to find the supreme truth and its political orientation makes it the place for the breeding of untruths.

Tagore lived during those times when Bengal was going through a religious transitional phase. The Hindu religion was in the hands of the higher Brahminical classes who were modifying and fabricating the understanding of Hindu religion according to their own vested interests. Tagore also questioned those men who have taken the responsibility of

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the propagation of religious message. All the religious gurus of every religion strive for power. But the power they desire is from the external world, not from their inner self. All the religions teach to propagate the message of love and compassion, and the religious teachers are supposed to make it accessible to the masses. The religious hypocrisy has seeped so deep down inside all those religious men that they are in a delusion that whatever they are doing is best for the masses. Tagore was well aware of the fact that all the religions are giving shelter to the Satans of the society and which is good if they could change the devil but religion grants them shelter for the personal benefit. Tagore was totally against this kind of religion. His notion of religion does not conform to any institutionalised form of religion. His version of religion was of 'personal realisation'. Religion for him was the ideal moral behavior in the society. By establishing the Brahmo Samaj, he aimed at eradicating the influence of orthodox Hinduism and age-old customs of Hinduism. The objective of Brahmo Samaj was to oppose idol worship and abolish the practice of priesthood and sacrifice and to spread the ideals of "rationalism and enlightenment" in modern India.

During Tagore's time, the conflict between the Brahmos and the Orthodox Hindus was frequent. Tagore hailed from the Brahmo background and he was highly influenced by the thoughts of Raja Rammohan Roy. By virtue of his affiliation to Brahmo Samaj, he should have been a committed Brahmo. But Tagore, a poet-philosopher, was not blind to the religious hypocrisy on the part of Brahmo Samaj. During his times, being a Brahmo Samaji meant becoming the modern educated man, irrespective of the one's understanding of the basic tenets propounded by Raja Rammohan Roy for being a Brahmo Samaji. The only thing which Brahmos were doing was that they were developing contempt and intolerance towards the orthodox Hindus. According to them, they had having a better understanding of religion since they belonged to the legacy which eradicated the social follies created by the Hindu tradition. Tagore was against such kind of religious understanding of Brahmos. He even spoke of it in an open message 'Brahmo Samaj Centenary' and tried to give a message to all the Brahmo Samajis that "Sectarianism is materialistic... It breeds in the minds of its members a jealous sense of separateness that give rise to conflicts more deadly than conflicts of worldly interests. It is a worse enemy of the truth of religion than atheism." (qtd. in Ghosh 747-748)

The hypocrisy on behalf of Brahmos is also echoed in his novel *Gora* where Tagore portrays both kinds of characters – Brodasundari and Haran babu. Brodasundari represents the hypocrite part of Brahmo Samaj, who possesses both power and say in the Brahmo Samaj but is oblivious to its essence whereas the character of Poreshbabu is one of the enlightened Brahmo who knows every facet of life and has never forced any of his family members to walk the path of Brahmo system. He allows everyone in his family to choose their own path. When his daughter Lalita wants to marry Binoy, he does not show any kind of resistance; rather, he asks Lalita to take her own decision.

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Serialized in the Bengali periodical *Prabashi* from August 1907 to February 1910, *Gora* appeared as a book in February 1910. This book version lacked certain passages, which had been bowdlerized from the serialized original. The Visva-Bharti edition of 1928 re-inserted some of the omitted portions and some more discarded passages were restored to the text that appeared in the 1941 edition of *Rabindra Rachanabali*. The present paper takes Radha Chakravarty's translation of *Gora* for analysis.

The novel is set amidst modern Calcutta, probably in the 1880's where it revolves around Gourmohan babu (Gora), the eponymous protagonist and Binoy Bhushan who is his bosom friend. It is set in the troublesome times when the Bengali fraternity in Kolkata (Calcutta) was severely divided into the traditional orthodox Hindus and the modernized, liberal thinking Brahmos proselytized by the Brahmo Samaj that was then the newest cult and was in vogue.

Of these two factions, the Hindus unfailingly followed and took pride in their renascent rituals and ceremonies while the Brahmos were in regular clashes with orthodoxy and vehemently opposed all idol-worships, caste system etc. Yet both the communities were not devoid of their own hypocrisies, contradictions and flaws, as in both the factions every member was first an individual with his/her own conviction. However, that was the time when English education had become more acceptable across the nation as well as in Calcutta and the intellectual awareness amongst the new gentry was at its peak.

Numerous characters in the novel are framed by such a social background, each of which is unique and strongly individualistic. In fact, it is through these various characters and their stories that Tagore weaves almost every single concern of the society (mainly the religious narrow-mindedness) in the novel. Hence, the novel is knitted with several issues, intermediary stories and events, which though sometimes seem to be winding away from the core theme, still add on to the beauty of the story and its motive.

Gora (Gourmohan) is a six feet tall, broad chested, young gentleman who is a fanatical Hindu nationalist, strikingly fair-skinned (from where his name is derived) and in possession of a forceful, magnetic personality. He represents the undying spirit of struggle for freedom from the British. However, his candidness and impelling attitude makes him appear as overconfident, self-asserting, aggressive and a fierce person who imposes his opinions unto others. However, Gora at heart is an eternal optimist dreaming about his ideal Bharatvarsha, an idea of a prosperous and happy India, which according to him can only be achieved by knitting together all the classes under the one ambit of Hinduism. As a person, he is highly patriotic and sympathetic, unable to tolerate injustice against the poor and the browbeaten, including Muslims.

Gora's denial of his newly evolved feelings for Sucharita and then the unhurried dawning of role of women in his dream country Bharatvarsha, his pain when he learns about Binoy's inclination towards Brahmos, his bewilderment upon knowing the facts relating to

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his birth, then his abomination of religion and caste, eventually his final atonement for forsaking his mother's feeling in his pursuit has all been skillfully woven in the novel. This particular character is so well portrayed that one loves and hates him at the same time or constantly keeps oscillating between the feelings of hatred and appreciation for him. Tanika Sarkar in her article "Rabindranath's *Gora* and the Intractable Problem of Indian Patriotism" highlights, "Gora is its self-expression at its strongest point. What makes him especially convincing and compelling, however, is that he himself is torn" (58).

The story takes shape when these two Hindu boys are exposed to Poreshbabu, an idealist, mature and high thinking gentleman, also a mouthpiece of Tagore. His family represents the other faction of the society, the Brahmos. Poreshbabu's family has adopted a more open-minded and liberal lifestyle where even the women folk of the house have no limitations on meeting or discussing with guests and visitors. Sucharita and Lolita are the main female protagonists who are educated and assertive women and have their own point of view in life. Lolita, as a bildungsroman character, is much ahead of her times and during the course of the story undergoes transition from a confused, guilt-ridden meek girl to a brave realistic person, who has no hesitation about accepting her feelings for Binoy. Sucharita, on the other hand, maintains her demeanor throughout the novel remarkably, when she undergoes an agitation within herself for being attracted towards Gora who is of a totally opposite mindset.

Although some parts might get a little tiring and consuming it does not last long. The story does have a couple of big and small twists and turns. The story unruffles when Gora finally discovers that he is actually Irish. His parents, who worked at the regiment, were good friends of Krishnadayal who adopted him. The reason being, Gora's parents had to leave their son under unavoidable circumstances due to the state of war India was in back then. There is obvious irony in the personality of Gora. Previously, a vehement supporter of Brahmo traditions, he later becomes a strict Hindu. Lolita who is a strong headed independent girl falls in love with Binoy which the reader does not foresee and they end up getting married fighting against all odds. On the other hand, Gora falls for Sucharita (who is relatively calmer and thinks for herself) without his knowledge quite unaware of what awaited him.

The setting of the novel *Gora* is probably in the 1880s, when Gora, born in 1857 had just completed his university education. This was the time when Bengal was filled with the renaissance spirit. It is measured as a wave of a many-sided awakening, symbolizing the rebirth of Bengal. During renaissance period, various social reformer came together to form a broad stream of awakening flowing towards the single goal of emancipating people from the social follies. The idea of renaissance in Bengal was conceived and started by the people who hailed from the educated gentry of Bengal.

This is certainly the one side of the coin which informs the incomplete knowledge of a total impression of resurgent energy and cultural endeavour. In an innovative and heroic

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age, number of men thought, wrote and worked in so many different ways that they remained unmatched hitherto. Together they left no stone unturned to change Bengal drastically. It is no wonder that Bengal feels grateful to all of them.

This particular historical assessment, however, deals only with externals i.e. the manifested glory of Bengal renaissance. As no village is abode of milk and honey only, so was the plight of Bengal renaissance. The existence of independent and even mutually opposed trends in a period of intellectual awareness and activity are not unnatural. As Bengal renaissance was mainly associated with social reforms, so were the number of ways to achieve the reformation. Thus, as one goes deeper into the intellectual life of the period - one finds the contradictions, the sharply opposed point of views and the conflicts of real life. Controversies incept at every step, concerning the pursuit of the right path; differences of opinion leading to clashes in practice; men excited and disturbed. They supported some trends and courses of action while rejecting others.

An investigation of the inner conflict within Bengal's awakening reveals two main trends, both of which naturally find an echo in Rabindranath Tagore's all encompassing mind. One may conveniently discover the two currents of thought as Westernism or liberalism, and Orientalism or traditionalism. The liberal faction in Bengal is represented by the Brahmos and the traditional faction is represented by the orthodox Hindus. Radha Chakravarty in *Novelist Tagore: Gender and Modernity in Selected Texts* also avers "This was the age of sectarian strife between two leading groups in Bengali society: the liberals and the conservatives" (63). The identification of these two trends leads to an error of seeing groups of the leading figures of the Bengal renaissance in two sharply demarcated rival camps. But, in reality, if one tries to figure out the two different beliefs, one understands that these are not two consistent concrete ideologies which once acquired, cannot be changed. The two tendencies are reflected often enough in the same person at different times perhaps even within the same period. The best example of this is the poet Rabindranath Tagore who himself was not immune from both currents of thoughts and his novel *Gora* is seen as the battleground in which Tagore's ideas can be seen battling through the extensive use of dialogue, argument, discussion and agreement.

Despite his liberal leanings and Brahmo affiliation, Tagore also sympathized with certain conservative principles. For example, Tagore's Shantiniketan is seen as the product of the influence of ancient Hindu ideals of education upon him, such as the 'Guru-Griha' described in the Hindu sacred law. According to Nirad C. Chaudhuri in *Thy Hand Great Anarch*, "Tagore also gave the most competent description of the nationalistic Neo-Hinduism in his novel *Gora*. Although in it he made liberalism win, he also showed how strong the Hindu case was" (609).

The beauty of the novel lies in the conversation of the characters of two different faiths on different occasions, where, Tagore eventually analyses that the problem is not with

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the faiths rather it is with the people. The most significant aspect of the novel is its protagonist Gora, who evolves from what he thinks he is, through what he is in reality, to what he becomes by his sheer mental strength of redeeming his cancelled past by an altogether greater vision of a new mission in life. Although, *Gora* describes the late decades of 19th century but it was written just after Swadeshi experience of the author. The dialogic nature of the novel exhibits that Tagore was also not clear about the righteousness of the nationalistic ideas, the clarity of which is seen in his next novel *The Home and The World*. Tanika Sarkar in her paper “Rabindrantah’s *Gora* and the Intractable Problem of Indian Patriotism” avers “In its heteroglossia and dialogic organization, as well as in many of its arguments, it anticipated much of the later *Ghaire Bhaire*, the novel that reflected on the Swadeshi experience” (55).

The most important issue in the novel is the threat to culture where indigenous culture is under the threat of degeneration because of colonisers. Gora finds the native culture threatened from outside both by foreign fiat and the missionaries, according to whom the native culture is based on unscientific beliefs. It should be admitted that if one probes the character of Gora, one finds that he is more of patriot than a religious character. In the similar vein, Gora in conversation with Sucharita admits “I can’t say for sure that I feel devoted to the deity, but I am devoted to patriotism. I believe in revering the object of the entire nation’s worship through all these ages. I can never regard Him with venom like Christian missionary” (535). In the novel, his religious orthodoxy is only an instinct to fight the incursion of foreign ideas. He defends and upholds all the Hindu philosophy with all its follies because he does not want to show weakness before the enemy. He even rejects the various reform movements like Brahmoism as an act of conceding to the foreign tradition. One such incident is when Gora counters Haran babu. Haran babu holds Bengali Bhadarlok responsible for all its malpractices and evil customs. Due to this they “... are not even worthy of social interaction with the British” (372). Gora counters and states that if it is true then it is humiliating to be tempted by the idea of mingling with the British. Haran babu revering his own self, with the luxury of being Brahmo, arrogantly asserts, “...those who have made themselves worthy are sufficiently honoured by the British” (372). In response to his argument, Gora tactfully attacks the Brahmoism “Where honour for one highlights the dishonor for all others, I count such honour an insult” (372). Tagore in this conversation seems to warn people of religious hypocrisy. Haran babu is shown as the prototype of hypocrite Brahmos and hypocrisy in Brahmo Samaj was the order of day in those times. Tagore was himself a Brahmo but he also got disillusioned with Brahmoism when people like Haran babu multiplied in the Brahmo Samaj. Tagore warned the people of India that the religious hypocrisy in any religion is like the strangling of that very religion. In one of his messages entitled “Brahmo Samaj Centenary” Tagore highlighted that:

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We have seen in our country a recrudescence of the blind faith that makes no discrimination between the spiritual significance of a religion and its outer crust that not only obscures it, but gives it a materialistic grossness of structure. Men who follow the path of indiscriminate acceptance, go to the length of defending their position by a philosophy according to which all conceptions and representations of the infinite have a uniform value, being all equally inadequate or irrelevant. Such sophistry makes it lazily easy for us to confine our devotion within the boundaries of our own sect, and unthinkingly allow our minds to confuse customs that are inert with the wisdom that has eternal dynamic force. It is a symptom of our egotism, this clinging with fanatical fervor to all that is accidental in our religion, making it inhospitable, and a source of endless strife. Such a religious attitude of mind is the greatest calamity, specially in the present age, for the peace and welfare of man. (qtd. in Ghosh 747)

Rabindranath Tagore denigrated all forms of factionalism, sectarianism, communalism, and Brahmo nationalism. In one of his letter written in March 18, 1913, to Ajit Chakrabarti, it can be traced that the contrast between Brahmo universalism and the varieties of human divisiveness is never sharp. The fact that the letter incepts with a distressing prophecy, based on a contradiction between high ideals and actual practice in the West, indicates that Tagore was beginning to comprehend the problem of distortion in faiths not as unique to Brahmos or Bengalis only, but as a human problem. "The West which is about to destroy the world," wrote Tagore, "has nevertheless produced great men who have courageously fought against the fashion of placing nationalism above religion." In the same letter, Tagore is also seen as extremely agitated by Brahmo sectarianism. He elevated Rammohun Roy to the status of one of the greatest men produced in modern India. "But the Brahmo Samaj," wrote Tagore "is belittling Rammohun Roy by judging him as a Brahmo minus the Hindu society" (Kopf 302). The apparent idea in all this dialectics is his intention to develop Brahmoism and reformed Hinduism alike. Tagore was of the view that the status quo of Hinduism was filled with defects and abuses and it must be amended in a way that it reflected the true Hinduism which was found in *Upanishads*. Rabindranath aimed to integrate a smaller unit i.e. Brahmo with a larger unit of Hindu society. At the same time he advocated that Hindu society integrates itself with the larger unit of Asian civilizations, propounding the ideals of internationalism which was the dream of Tagore.

Through Gora as his mouthpiece, Tagore enunciates his developing philosophy about Hinduism. Further, Tagore also shows Gora as the one who is intolerant to other faiths because of his radicalism. This progress of dialectics in the novel suggests that the author himself is trying to formulate a personal faith, which is neither Brahmoism nor Hinduism.

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This dialectics is visible in the subsequent novels of Tagore as well and it is from this that he eventually evolves a kind of ‘universalism’ that became his legacy.

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